

Polishing Reykjavík

The Third Space between Poland and Iceland

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ABSTRACT

After noticing the great interest of the Polish migrants in Polish cultural events in Reykjavík, Ólafur Ásgeirsson saw a niche for his artistic explorations. He created Pólís, a theatre group comprised of Poles and Icelanders, professional and amateur actors. Polish actors to create performances aimed at the Polish minority. Pólís's second production, *Tu jest za drogo* (It's Too Expensive Here), was staged at the Reykjavík City Theatre, a prestigious location for Reykjavík's cultural life in 2022. This move transgressed social and political boundaries, perhaps even challenging the city's cultural life and beliefs about the immigrant's place in the fabric of the city.

In my article, firstly, I position *Tu jest za drogo* among other strategies for staging performances in foreign languages. Secondly, I place it in a transmigrant context (Glick Schiller 1995), which studies embeddedness in two or more cultures, to explain to whom and why the Pólís' strategy might appeal. Thirdly, I refer to the concept of third space in theatre (Woodson 2015) to explain the power relations in the creation and reception processes.

My material comes from semi-structured interviews with the Pólís' members and a City Theatre representative, as well as qualitative analysis of the social media texts and analysis of the Pólís' play *Tu jest za drogo*.

KEYWORDS

Pólís, Ólafur Ásgeirsson, migrant theatre, Polish migrant theatre, third space in theatre, transmigration, Icelandic theatre, Borgarleikhúsið

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Even though we are experiencing such a huge influx of migrants³ and refugees into Europe, a play in a foreign language staged on the municipal stage is not an ordinary event. This happened in Iceland, where Reykjavík City Theatre (Borgarleikhúsið) coproduced a play with the PóliS theatre group.⁴ The play was staged mainly in Polish with Icelandic and English subtitles and developed by Poles and Icelanders whose working language was English. The production as well as the reception processes brought cultures together, had to rework different power relations, and transgress cultural and social boundaries in order to deliver the play successfully. In this article, I focus on what the production process looked like and theorise it with the help of Stephani Etheridge Woodson (2015) and her application of the concept of third space in theatre for young audiences. I also look at the reception process and describe how a performance in a foreign language may have shifted the usual migrant binaries in the audience. To better explain how migrant cultural projects can contribute to subverting social norms in theatre institutions and in cities, I turn to the concept of transmigration (Glick Schiller 1995) to account for being embedded in two or more cultures.

The research methodology employed in this study mainly involved two data collection methods. Firstly, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with the members of the artistic crew as well as a representative from Borgarleikhúsið. These interviews facilitated an understanding of the creative processes, intentions, and collaborative dynamics that shaped the production. Additionally, the study delved into the public reception of the play by engaging in desk research. This involved a review of social media platforms, encompassing both reviews and comments, to discern audience perspectives and reactions. Furthermore, I examined the play text and viewed a recorded performance. In the article, I first position *Tu jest za drogo* among

1 It is a rather popular word play in Poland between Polish and Polish, a verb formed from the adjective Polish. Here it refers to making something more Polish. In 2022, Polish author Ewa Marcinek published a collection of short stories and poems entitled *Polishing Iceland* (Reykjavík: Pennann og Eymundsson). In 2020 she used some of her text for the performance *Polishing Iceland* that premiered in Tjarnarbíó in Reykjavík.

2 This article was developed as part of a project financed from the Polish state budget under the programme of the Minister of Education and Science under the name “Science for Society,” project number NdS/538415/2021/2022, total project value PLN 370 990,00.

3 Using the most inclusive and common description, I define a migrant as a person who changes their country of residence, often for work or better living conditions, even though it is a complex matter there is no consensus as to who should be called a migrant. See Anderson & Blinder 2019.

4 *Tu jest za drogo* (It's Too Expensive Here) by PóliS, author: Ólafur Ásgeirsson, director: Salvör Gullbrá Þórarinsdóttir, dramaturg: Hjalti Vigfússon, music: Unnsteinn Manuel Stefánsson, set design and costumes: Wiola Ujazdowska, actors: Jakub Ziemann, Aleksandra Skołożyńska, Ólafur Ásgeirsson, Sylwia Zajkowska, Andrés Pétur Þorvaldsson. Premiere: 18.2.2022 in Borgarleikhúsið. The project was funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture – Performing Arts Council and the City of Reykjavík.

other plays that use foreign languages on stage, applying the concepts of internationalisation and transnationalism. I then turn to the issue of transmigration to explain why this play can be seen as a third space.

***Tu Jest Za Drogo* by Pólís**

Pólís⁵ is a theatre group initiated by Ólafur Ásgeirsson after he saw a large number of moviegoers leaving the cinema after watching a Polish film in Reykjavík. Ásgeirsson believed that since the cinema drew such a large audience, there was potential for more cultural events catering to the Polish migrant community. He invited two Polish migrants, a chef, Jakub Ziemann, and an amateur actor with experience in improvisational theatre, Aleksandra Skołożyńska, to develop a theatre performance for the Polish diaspora. In 2021, the group received a grant from the Icelandic Ministry of Education and Culture – Performing Arts Council to produce a play *Co za poroniony pomysł*⁶ (What a Misguided Idea) in Tjarnarbíó in Reykjavík. The plot was inspired by their own experiences: the play is the story of Kuba, a Polish chef working in Iceland, and two actors, Ola and Óla, who attempt to stage a successful play in Polish. They received the Grímuverðlaun Award for Debut of the Year 2021 for it. Inspired by the success, they decided to stage the second performance in 2022 – this time on the municipal theatre stage.



Figure 1: *Tu jest za drogo*. From the top: Andrés Pétur Þorvaldsson, Sylwia Zajkowska, Aleksandra Skołożyńska, Jakub Ziemann, Ólafur Ásgeirsson. Photo by Leifur Wilberg.

Tu jest za drogo (It's Too Expensive Here⁷) is a comedy that follows a Polish couple in love who travel to Iceland to earn money for their dream wedding. Their story humorously emphasizes the challenges and peculiarities of communication between Poles and Icelanders. Ásgeirsson laid the foundation for the draft of the story, while the Polish actors infused it with the nuances of Polish cultural context and their insights into Polish culture and migrant experiences in Iceland. They used theatre improvisation as a method for developing the script. The artistic crew from

5 The name of the group has three parts to it: Pól - for Poland, Ís - for Ísland, and it incorporates the short version of the name of the founder in the middle: Óli.

6 *Co za poroniony pomysł* (What a Misguided Idea) by Pólís, director: Salvör Gullbrá Þórarinsdóttir, dramaturg: Birnir Jón Sigurðsson, set design and costumes: Þórdís Erla Zoëga, actors: Jakub Ziemann, Aleksandra Skołożyńska, Ólafur Ásgeirsson. Premiere: 4.2.2021 in Tjarnarbíó.

7 In this article, I will use the Polish title rather than the translation, as this is how the whole crew refers to the performance.

the first production was joined by actors⁸ Sylwia Zajkowska and Andrés Pétur Þorvaldsson. The proposal for this project was presented to the Reykjavík City Theatre which concurred with PÓLÍŚ' vision regarding the significant presence of Polish migrants in Reykjavík and their potential interest in the arts. It was deemed essential to make an effort to involve them in the local theatre scene.⁹ Therefore, this second production was co-produced and staged at the Borgarleikhúsið in Polish with Icelandic and English subtitles. Like the previous production, it was created by a Polish-Icelandic ensemble. Their common language was English. *Tu jest za drogo* also became a success: bonus performances were added to the repertoire of the Borgarleikhúsið at the request of the audience; I also found requests in Facebook comments from Poles in other parts of Iceland for the show to go on tour.

Foreign Performances: Internationalisation and Transnationalism

My experience of migration leads me to the observation that theatre is not a medium very accommodating to other languages. Watching a performance in a language other than that of the host is a rare occasion. To situate *Tu jest za drogo* in the theatrical experiences of European migrants, I identify five strategies commonly used to include foreign languages on stage. (1) Minority performances which aim to uphold and preserve minority culture and language and often stage canonical texts from the minority's country of origin in the original language. (2) Guest performances for minorities, during which theatres from the minority's country of origin perform to celebrate cultural heritage, preserve the mother tongue, and build relationships between minority members. (3) International festivals and guest performances that enable local theatre audiences to watch acclaimed productions from abroad. (4) Foreign actors on stage who perform in their native tongues – their presence changed over time: in the past, renowned actors toured abroad, performing well-known roles;¹⁰ today, casting foreign actors serves as an artistic and political strategy, such as providing a platform for refugee actors to work in their new country.¹¹ (5) Multilingual performances which are typically employed as an educational or political strategy to foster inclusivity and visibility for migrants, refugees, minorities and all inhabitants speaking other languages within the realm of theatre. In all those strategies, language plays an important role: it can ensure inclusivity with translation unless the artistic intention is to deliberately create a sense of discomfort among the audience.¹² These strategies can play a crucial role in facilitating internationalisation and transnationalism within the context of theatre.

Internationalisation encompasses the exposure of audiences and performers to unfamiliar elements such as diverse individuals, languages, and ideas, thereby promoting introspection and

8 Þorvaldsson is an Icelandic professional actor. Zajkowska is a Polish professional actor who also worked outside her profession after moving to Iceland.

9 Magnús Þór Þorbergsson 24.6.2022.

10 In certain instances, audiences were already familiar with the parts being portrayed, eliminating the need for translation (Szymanski-Düll 28.4.2022). For instance, Helena Modjeska, who performed Shakespearean plays in the United States, captivated audiences with her performances in Polish. Alternatively, the acting prowess of foreign actors alone was enough to enchant spectators who perceived these performances as "a form of opera without music." (Love 1984, 96 in Garde & Severn 2020, 6). The overarching goal of this strategy was to witness the live performances of the most celebrated and talented actors.

11 For instance, the German Exile Ensemble, established in 2016 at the Maxim Gorki Theatre, featured refugee actors from Afghanistan, Palestine, and Syria. The aim was to provide these actors with a suitable platform to work in Germany while in exile (Stone 2020, 206 and Wilmer 2018, 196). Particularly in the initial stages, the ensemble members performed in their mother tongues.

12 One example of the inclusive approach is the 2017 children's opera titled *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten/ Bremen Mızıkacıları* composed for the Komische Oper Berlin. This production incorporated German and Turkish. In order to facilitate comprehension, a specific translation technique was employed: repetition. Turkish lines were sung to the same music as the German lines, giving the impression to non-Turkish speakers that the Turkish version was a translation rather than conveying new information (Stone 2020, 205). An example of the approach that created discomfort is the play *Skelett eines Elefanten in der Wüste* at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin. This production utilizes a non-linear narrative and strategically positioned supertitles, challenging the audience to divert their gaze from the performance. This deliberate disorientation aims to evoke an experience similar to that of a refugee, creating a sense of displacement and unease (Stone 2020, 206-7).

self-reflection.¹³ As articulated by the authors of *Theatre and Internationalization*,¹⁴ this concept entails an ongoing and dynamic process whereby local theatres, situated within specific countries with their unique laws and traditions, undergo influences from abroad. These influences may shape and enrich the local theatre landscape. Transnationalism, however, focuses more on "(...) linkages and exchanges across borders,"¹⁵ i.e., it highlights the exchanges and movements that occur between two or more countries. In their analysis, Ulrike Garde and John R. Severn argued for looking at the flows and influences within the framework of "internationalization", due to defining theatre as "a gathering of specific bodies in specific times and spaces engaged in specific tasks."¹⁶ In this perspective, all international influences are only present here and now, in the specific moment and place. Furthermore, it seems that the choice of this concept is influenced by pre-existing established structures in which influences are settled, such as a permanent stage with its own traditions, staff, repertoire, and audience. No matter what happens, this permanent structure remains in place and may be subject to change as a result of these influences or remain unchanged.

I see, however, a potential in the framework of "transnationalism" because it brings in the histories and futures of each production and settles it in the larger context. I have chosen to conceptualize it as a theatrical event,¹⁷ i.e. an event that can be set in a wider time frame that begins (long) before and ends (long) after the theatre performance. This broader perspective allows the examination of theatre from a more comprehensive angle, enabling analysis of not only temporal influences but also how the results of such collaborations can unfold, affecting those who participated and those who witnessed them.

Tu jest za drogo is not a typical example of incorporating a foreign language on stage – it takes from several strategies. The cast was international (with Polish and Icelandic actors), but everyone on stage spoke Polish (a minority language). The performance – like multilingual performances – drew heavily upon the personal experiences of the foreign actors. The play was co-financed and staged at an established city theatre in their regular repertoire, which is rare for typical migrant productions. The play was aimed at the Polish minority, but subtitles in Icelandic and English were aimed at the theatre's regular audience. The project would not have come about if the first production, *Co za poroniony pomysł*, had not been a success. *Tu jest za drogo* also had an immediate further impact on the cast. As a result of her performance, Sylwia Zajkowska was chosen to read the poem *Fjallkonan* (The Lady of the Mountain) during 2022 Iceland's Independence Day celebrations¹⁸, which is one of the highest recognitions a person can receive, as *Fjallkonan* represents the essence of the Icelandic nation.¹⁹ Aleksandra Skołożyńska has returned to Poland, where she is working on a monodrama about her migration experience – she emphasises that it was the Icelandic experience and culture that encouraged her to delve into her artistic ambitions.²⁰ Ólafur Ásgeirsson has to some extent become a representative of Poland among Icelanders²¹ and continues to pursue his career among the Icelandic Polish community. While internationalisation is present in performance and enriched theatre life in Reykjavík, I clearly see that such works, where the international aspect is at the centre, have the potential to influence the performers' lives – just as their lives have inspired such projects. They are more about exchanges and building links between cultures and as such become transnational events.

Polish Transmigrants in Iceland

Sylwia Zajkowska told me: "Some of the spectators might not have been going to theatre in Poland

13 Garde & Severn 2020, 4.

14 Garde & Severn 2020.

15 Garde & Severn 2020, 7.

16 Garde & Severn 2020, 8.

17 Sauter 2004 and 2008.

18 RÚV 20.6.2022.

19 Whoever reads the poem may be seen as a political statement about who is included in Icelandic culture. In 2017, in Hafnarfjörður, it was a transwoman and in 2018 in Reykjavík a drag queen.

20 "There, everyone has a regular job during the day and after work is an actor, a writer, a director. I've learned that I can do theatre the Icelandic way: a little bit of everything." Aleksandra Skołożyńska 3.11.2023, my translation.

21 Jakub Ziemann 23.8.2023.

at all. But the fact that our performance was in Polish and therefore accessible to them, was enough for them to go. (...) And later they asked us to do more Polish theatre.”²² The language of the performance and its cultural accessibility sparked interest among Polish migrants. The usual issues associated with not participating in foreign cultural events, i.e., lack of background, language barrier, different acting and directing traditions, as well as the history of the development of theatre – so everything that Willmar Sauter qualifies as contextual theatricality²³ – were not there. *Tu jest za drogo* was more familiar to the Polish community. However, it is important to note that the level of interest varied within the Polish minority community. Borgarleikhúsið made proactive efforts to reach out to companies that employed a substantial number of Polish workers, often low-skilled and living in a rather closed diaspora. They extended offers of discounted tickets to them with the anticipation that the performance might pique their interest. Unfortunately, their outreach efforts yielded a smaller response from this particular demographic than expected.²⁴ From the data gathered during the interviews with the ensemble, I conclude that the Poles who showed the highest interest in the production were interested in Polish affairs, but also open to Icelandic culture and other international relations. To better explain how this group can be characterised and why *Tu jest za drogo* was successful among them, I will use the concept of transmigration.

Transmigrants – a term coined in 1994 by Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc²⁵ – are people who are embedded in more than one nation. The authors describe the process of transmigration in contrast to what is usually understood as migration viewed via political agendas and policies: a process of assimilation into a new society and culture. That means that migrants should “abandon their own culture and identity and merge into or help forge the mainstream culture.”²⁶ It is seen as a long-term process (that could take several generations), but assimilation is the only clear goal. In contrast, non-assimilated migrants stand in opposition to this group, and they are frequently regarded as an unsuccessful endeavour. They will function in closed communities, often cut off from the culture and society of their new country of residence. Transmigrants, however, settle and become integrated into the economic and political institutions, localities, and daily life of their new country of residence while additionally maintaining connections with their countries of origin. Their daily lives and identities are shaped by interconnections and exchanges across international borders.²⁷ Also, they are not expected to stay in the new country, but actually often move elsewhere.²⁸

The Polish diaspora constitutes the most prominent expatriate community in Iceland and is diverse. Initially, the motivation for relocating to Iceland was primarily financial. During the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, a period marked by high unemployment rates in Poland, Polish laborers eagerly migrated in pursuit of better wages. These individuals often held unskilled positions, typically within the fishing and other industries, and they tended to reside on the outskirts of communities where these factories were located.²⁹ Over time, personal reasons related to culture and the Icelandic way of life also became significant motivators for migration. As this shift occurred, more migrants began relocating with their families. However, many still maintained connections to Poland, whether through social ties, retaining their old apartments, returning for holidays, or even engaging in seasonal employment back in Poland. Now, Polish migration in Iceland is large

22 Sylwia Zajkowska 21-26.8.2023, my translation.

23 Sauter 2004, 8-9.

24 Magnús Þór Þorbergsson 24.6.2022.

25 Basch et al. 1994.

26 Glick Schiller 2007, 453.

27 Geldof 2020, 103 (based on Faist et al. 2013).

28 With the development of communication devices, social media, and transportation – or in other words, the facilitation of mobility – the understanding of transmigration has developed. Under this umbrella term academics research accommodates different kinds of mobility, to name a few: lifestyle migration (i.e., relocating often and choosing mobility for reasons not primarily economic and political, but often personal, social, and cultural; see for example Bantman-Masum 2015; Brujić 2021), elastic migration (i.e., moving to another country, but only a few kilometres across the border, often for tax reasons, and dividing life in between two countries; see for example van Houtum & Gielis 2006), or flexible migration (i.e., the pattern of moving from one country to another every few years; see for example Geldof et. al. 2020).

29 Wojtyńska 2011.

enough to be noticeable in everyday life³⁰. Statistics show that in 2023, there were 20,558³¹ Poles living in Iceland, which was more than 5% of the total Icelandic population (387,758) and the largest minority in Iceland.³² All of my interviewees pointed out a consistent observation: a Polish migrant can reside in Iceland for a decade or even longer without acquiring proficiency in either Icelandic or English. This phenomenon suggests the existence of a group that lives in Iceland but does not actively seek to assimilate into Icelandic society. To a certain extent, it is as if they inhabit “a parallel society”³³ within the country. They maintain their Polish identity and simply continue practising it while living in another country. They constitute a segment of migrants who have not assimilated into the host society. At the opposite end of the spectrum, there is a group of migrants who have assimilated very successfully, often by marrying Icelanders, sometimes even changing their names to sound Icelandic, and fully becoming part of Icelandic society. In between these two distinct groups are other migrants: those who initially arrived in Iceland for short-term purposes such as earning money, seeking adventure, or as tourists who later decided to extend their stay. Many of them had a reasonable level of proficiency in English before coming to Iceland, which facilitated their integration into the broader expatriate community within the country. This group often actively strives to become part of Icelandic society by forming friendships, making efforts to learn the language, and contemplating long-term residency. Simultaneously, they maintain connections with Poland and remain engaged in Polish affairs. Sometimes they choose to move to other countries for personal reasons or to pursue an education. In other cases, they return to Poland, but maintain ties with Iceland and practice the Icelandic way of life to some extent. In this way, they are embedded in more than one nation, making them transmigrants.

After I watched *Tu jest za drogo* for the first time, my intuition was the same as Borgarleikhúsið's: the performance ought to have appealed to all migrants. On the one hand, it was staged in Polish. On the other hand, the performance played on the Polish-Icelandic stereotypes, which were very easy to understand and guaranteed laughter coming from any person who had a migration experience.³⁴ At the same time, the performance took place at the City Theatre, which meant that it appealed to spectators with a certain level of cultural capital and knowledge about the cultural and social life of the city they lived in. Not surprisingly, those who were hesitant to venture beyond their self-imposed Polish comfort zones were less inclined to attend. Yet those who were open to new experiences and actively sought integration into Icelandic society may have been attracted to this event, even if theatre was not their preferred activity in Poland. *Tu jest za drogo* could have provided a new and meaningful space for them. In a theatre where the typical audience was predominantly Icelandic, they had the opportunity to hear their mother tongue being spoken on stage and witness portrayals of their own life experiences.

Third Space in Theatre

The third space in postcolonial studies is a productive non-physical space that comes to life when two cultures meet: “the encounter of two social groups with different cultural traditions and potentials of power as a special kind of negotiation or translation (...) takes place in the Third Space of enunciation.”³⁵ The term was coined by Homi Bhabha in his studies on postcolonial societies and refers to space where the binary oppositions of self/other, colonizer/colonized, or dominant/subaltern are disrupted and transformed to move beyond the limitations of binary thinking

30 My personal experience confirms that: I was almost able to use only Polish when I visited Reykjavík in 2022. There were Poles helping me at the airport, driving my bus, and working at my hotel; I could hear Polish in almost every restaurant I entered.

31 Statistics Iceland 10.11.2023. To put this in perspective: The Danes, who colonized and controlled Iceland for centuries, are the second largest ethnic group in Iceland and make up only 1% of the total population.

32 Lindsay 2019.

33 Broder 2011.

34 One stereotype used in the performance is that Icelanders are lazy and therefore need a lot of breaks, so when they come to work, they immediately have a coffee break, followed by a lunch break, and then an afternoon break before it is time to go home. As Poles are often known as “hard workers” (i.e. they work long hours and try to avoid breaks), a culture that respects the need for a break often accentuates this stereotype.

35 Ika & Wagner.

and to create new forms of identity and culture that are hybrid, heterogeneous, and inclusive.³⁶ Stephani Etheridge Woodson brings the third space into the Theatre for Young Audiences (TFY) and explains how such creative space works: “[Bhabha’s] work uncovers the underlying meanings contained in seemingly simple moments. His concept of the third space acknowledges that while western cultures often polarize identities and structures (e.g., boys/girls, men/women, work/play, child/adult, and public/private), an engagement with these binaries and boundaries can create gaps between. This “between” landscape calls into question fixed categorizations and fosters new possibilities for cultural meanings.”³⁷ The third space in TFY is therefore about finding the space in between, making productive use of the many possibilities between the binary dimensions and developing them to the benefit of both parties involved. Woodson uses the term to blur the lines that separate adults and children by emphasizing democratic practices. The goal is to achieve a non-hierarchical collaboration between the two groups with the aim of mutual transformation. This collaboration takes place in a third space that prioritizes community over individualism and strives for broader societal change rather than just individual development. What is interesting for me in the third space developed for TFY is the suspension of power relations for the creative processes. As such it can serve as a productive tool for analysing and understanding the work and reception processes in a production developed with and for migrants.

Unequal power relations between migrants and the host society are evident and constantly negotiated. They start with power differences in political representation, language barriers, and possible discrimination. The power imbalance can also manifest itself in mundane, everyday situations, such as not comprehending a joke due to a lack of cultural context, exhibiting different behaviour in social settings, or struggling to locate specific essential items while shopping. In the case of the traditional understanding of migration, it is the migrant who will always be in a disadvantaged position: it is they who have to do the work to fit and understand the receiving society. Assimilation entails becoming one with the new society, and is about sameness and oneness, while differences are removed or hidden. In the case of transmigration, it is the essence of difference and duality that becomes prominent. Transmigrants can be perceived differently by two countries: as migrants in the host society while also serving as ambassadors or enjoying a certain privilege in their home country. In today’s era of modern technology, this dual reception (and perception) of self can occur almost simultaneously, without the need for physical travel. Similar to hybridity described by Sten Pultz Moslund that “(...) contains a multiplicity of voices and languages that clash and fuse (...)”³⁸, transmigrant identity amalgamates elements from two or more cultures. During the interviews, my Polish interlocutors frequently employed a phrase attributed to Ewa Marcinek, a Polish-born writer: “I am too Polish for Iceland and too Icelandic for Poland.” This phrase cleverly encapsulates the complex transmigrant condition of being “in-between”, at the intersection of multiple cultures. What is inscribed, however, in such an identity is openness and interest in another culture. Transmigrants carry a special cultural capital – transcultural capital – that is a strategic asset which they use to maximise their opportunities.³⁹ My understanding is that having transcultural capital counteracts to some extent the power imbalance between the host society and migrants. But this happens mainly on a practical level concerning transmigrants while the host society may not even be aware of the existence of such capital and its benefits. The divisions and imbalances are still there but their form has changed. This is why I turn towards the concept of the third space: it does not only balance power relations but dismantles them and therefore fosters the transgression of borders between cultures.

Tu Jest Za Drogo as a Third Space

Pólís has been a meeting of two cultures from the beginning. This intersection of two cultures occurred within a context marked by power dynamics — namely, the Icelandic hosts and migrant Poles. To analyse the production as a third space, I will explore the encounter through the perspective of the host-guest dynamic and in the spheres, where this dynamic is the most visible, i.e., the production and reception processes.

36 See Bhabha 1994.

37 Woodson 2015, 15.

38 Moslund 2010, 16.

39 Meinhof & Triandafyllidou 2006, 202.

The production process required most of all openness, trust, and curiosity. Openness is well represented by Ásgeirsson's attitude towards Polish migrants. Before he came up with the idea for his first performance, *Co za poroniony pomysł*, he was not exceptionally interested in or deeply connected to Polish culture: he had very few Polish acquaintances and was unaware of the size of the Polish minority in Iceland.⁴⁰ But this was enough to ignite an artistic project targeted towards the Polish community. He could have looked into this foreign culture stereotypically and left it at that. After all, like many minorities all over the world, Poles are not always greeted warmly and face many stereotypes during their everyday lives. As a reviewer of the performance wrote: "I, like perhaps most Icelanders, am familiar with the prejudicial image that has been brought up by people from Eastern Europe for years. I remember how people talked about Poles and how they still talk about Poles. (...) prejudice and discrimination are not only directed at brown and black people but also at those whom we perceive as inferior within whiteness, those who are outside the centre, for example, those from Poland."⁴¹ Ásgeirsson, however, became "obsessed" with learning Polish⁴² via Duolingo⁴³ and wanted to understand the culture. While the ensemble used English as their working language, on social media, he used Polish while promoting the performance.⁴⁴ When I watch his video, I note that his Polish is surprisingly good, and I see him as someone who puts a lot of effort into his Polish delivery.

The Poles invited onto the project actively participated in polishing the play's text and making it sound genuine. They played a key role in explaining cultural differences, providing cultural insights, and giving the narrative authenticity by drawing on their own experiences. They also translated English original into Polish. The artistic process required trust from all participants. As one of the actors Ziemann said and Skołożyńska confirmed with nearly the same words: "So they also had to trust us a lot, because if it was us translating it all into Polish, well, they did not know at all what we were doing, what we were talking about. They saw our acting, our physical interactions, but we could do whatever we wanted with this project."⁴⁵ The Polish actors also had to show great trust when sharing their personal experiences. Moreover, they had to present



Figure 2: *Tu jest za drogo*. From the left: Andrés Pétur Þorvaldsson, Sylwia Zajkowska, Aleksandra Skołożyńska, Jakub Ziemann. Photo by Leifur Wilberg.

40 Ólafur Ásgeirsson 20.7.2022.

41 Hjálmsdóttir 2022, my translation.

42 Ólafur Ásgeirsson 20.7.2022.

43 An online app for learning languages.

44 For example: Leikfélagið Pólis 1.2.2022.

45 Jakub Ziemann 23.8.2023.

themselves and their culture with openness, looking at it from the perspective of a foreigner, knowing that they might be judged by stereotypes.

In all my interviews, it was consistently emphasised that the atmosphere they created together was characterised by partnership and curiosity. Polish actors received a lot of freedom in their artistic expression and development of the play. The acquaintances forged during the production transformed into enduring friendships and professional alliances, which proved invaluable for subsequent projects. All the actors stressed that they were welcomed by the staff in Borgarleikhúsið: people came up to them and asked what they were doing and they felt that they were treated just as equally as the permanent ensemble. During the production process, everyone successfully cultivated and maintained a space characterized by trust, openness, and equality, where differences were present and cherished rather than hidden and avoided.

Considering the theme of the performance, i.e., challenging stereotypes about Poles and Icelanders, the choice of comedy as a genre and Polish as the language of the performance appears well-justified. The comedy made the theme more accessible and the language made it possible to exchange the place that Icelanders and Poles usually take in the Icelandic theatre. To clarify this exchange, I propose a division in how the reception process can be approached: a host audience and a guest audience. Host audiences refer to those who have an understanding of the play, who frequently attend the theatre, and who feel comfortable in the audience. Guests, on the other hand, refer to audience members who do not feel that comfortable in the theatre due to different reasons, e.g., because they have difficulty understanding the language or context and are new to theatre. Hosts feel at home and guests feel more like strangers. In a typical performance in Borgarleikhúsið the hosts would be primarily Icelanders and Poles, other migrants and tourists would usually fall into the category of guests. In the case of *Tu jest za drogo*, however, these conventional binary divisions are subverted: the performance was conducted in Polish (with Icelandic and English subtitles), and it was the Poles who had the deepest understanding of both language and context. They could effectively serve as cultural intermediaries for others. As a result, Polish audiences could take on the role of hosts, while Icelandic audiences, who usually act as hosts in their City Theatre, could find themselves in the position of guests during this particular performance. As the reviewer described the process of spectating: “It is quite a special experience to attend a performance that has not been prepared for us Icelanders. Where I constantly have to glance from the screen of my phone, on which the translation is displayed, to the stage, in order to follow the plot, while the Poles sitting next to me almost fall off their chairs laughing at something I do not understand. Where I am an outsider. Where I am losing a privilege that I was sometimes not even aware of.”⁴⁶ The technology that the theatre chose to provide the translation on (a phone app) caused a delay in reaction, which made it possible for the actors to tell who was sitting in the audience. Zajkowska explained: “We knew who was laughing (...) when the audience laughed at the jokes, it was the Poles who laughed first, and only after a while the Icelanders [joined in – D.S.-N.], when they read the translation. (...) It was also funny [for us – D.S.-N.], because the jokes were aimed at Icelanders, their approach to work, and how they were perceived by Poles.”⁴⁷ It seems that it was important to depict this experience of lack of understanding to Icelanders through a translation technique, as it mirrored the experiences of migrants: “You certainly know what it is like when you arrive in a new country and you are in a new group of people who speak their language (Icelandic) and somewhere at some point they switch to this native language [for the entire conversation – D.S.-N.]. You are excluded from the conversation. So people from Iceland could now experience what it is like to be this immigrant and to be completely surrounded by people from another country, from Poland. (...) For them, it was a WOW experience.”⁴⁸ The shift between host and guests was deliberate and I would call it a political gesture. The genre of comedy made the delivery milder. It seems to me that it aimed at bringing about greater understanding between the two cultures, rather than causing lingering discomfort.

46 Hjalmsdóttir 2022, my translation. Hjalmsdóttir reflects on the fact that the translation was provided in an app on spectators' phones, so they had to look down and read the text on their mobiles to understand what was happening on stage.

47 Sylwia Zajkowska 21-26.8.2023.

48 Jakub Ziemann 23.8.2023.

Conclusion

I see *Tu jest za drogo* as an example of transgressing cultural boundaries. On a more general level, the inclusion of a foreign language in theatre can be a powerful political gesture: it makes another culture visible. When the chosen language belongs to a large minority, this gesture is all the more prominent, as it gives them space hitherto unavailable to them. On a more nuanced level, it is not only political gestures that are meaningful but also human gestures noticeable in values guiding the artistic process: partnership, equality, curiosity, and trust.

In this article, I have used the concepts of hosts and guests to explain how power relations change and how the effect of performance is created. Firstly, this binarity was abandoned in the creative process. This resulted in the dismantling of power relations between migrants (Poles) and hosts (Icelanders) and the creation of a third space that generated an atmosphere of understanding, openness and trust. Secondly, the division between hosts and guests shifted during the reception process. Those who usually felt comfortable in their theatre (the hosts) were relegated to the position of not being able to keep up and not understanding everything. This discomfort has put them in the guest role which migrants usually occupy. These endeavours allowed social and cultural boundaries to be surpassed.

Theoretically, in placing *Tu jest za drogo* among other productions using foreign languages, I relied on the concepts of internationalisation and transnationalism. Internationalism emphasises international influences on production – an encounter with the unfamiliar. Transnationalism focuses on exchanges across borders and movement between countries. While internationalisation provides a valuable approach to productions that have a foreign component, the concept of transnationalism allows us to place it in a broader context: how the production was created and what happens to its ideas and creators afterwards. I later drew on the concepts of transmigration and third space to discuss for whom this production appealed to most and how it was developed. Transmigrants are people embedded in more than one nation; their lives are influenced by transnational exchanges. They do not seek assimilation into the host society, but rather take from both cultures and create their transcultural capital. A third space in theatre is a space aiming at equality and seeking opportunities between binaries to benefit all involved. It seems to me that this combination of transmigrants adopting aspects of both cultures into their identities, and a third space in which representatives of both cultures meet with curiosity, openness and trust, has opened up a way for this performance to transcend different boundaries. On the one hand, it persuaded the City Theatre to stage the play in the language of Iceland's largest minority, putting their problems and longings in the spotlight. On the other hand, it made the audience, the residents of Reykjavík, able to step into the skin of a migrant and feel uncomfortable in their own theatre, while at the same time giving a temporary uplift to the migrants.

AUTHOR

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